"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE IMPERATIVE OF THE RURAL CHURCH

By Wesley A. Hotchkiss

The rural church today is in a position of peculiar advantage to speak to two of the most profound problems ever to confront the human spirit. One of these is the challenge of Communism to the ethical basis of Western culture. The other is the challenge of secular humanism within Western culture and its threat to destroy the dynamic of our Hebraic-Christian foundations.

This is not as much a dichotomy of a two-pronged attack on our culture as it would appear. These are rather two facets of the same problem of a resurgent and historic Christian faith facing its unchristian culture, whether this unchristian culture is our own or alien. Our national egotism makes us reluctant to recognize that a single challenge confronts the Christian faith; a single challenge with two facets--one behind the iron curtain and one within our own beloved capitalistic Western democracy. We cheerfully admit the threats from the other side of the curtain but our chauvinism blinds us to internal threats which do not look like the communist stereotype. In fact, certain demagogues have so warped our national attitudes that to identify any internal threat except the orthodox stereotyped, bomb-carrying communist is to run the risk of getting one's self labelled a communist. Such is the crazy paradox of our "security hysteria" which is nourished by McCarthyism or its successors.

Let us give attention to identifying these two challenges further, noting the relevance of the rural church to each.

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* An address delivered before The Town and Country Conference of the Northern California-Nevada Council of Churches, at Davis, California January 14, 1955. Dr. Hotchkiss is Director of The Town and Country Department, Board of Home Missions of the Congregational and Christian Church. Used by permission.

The East-West struggle comes to its clearest ideological focus in the relationship of human beings to the resources of the earth. Communism has a clearly defined materialistic concept of the manner in which human beings organize themselves to utilize the resources of the earth. All of history is interpreted within this dialectical materialism and man's freedom is determined by his ownership of the tools by which he fabricates the natural resources. Western democracy, on the other hand, has repeatedly asserted in its chief public documents that the ultimate significance of life is with the Creator, and not in the materials he has created. This rejection of atheistic materialism can be interpreted as a denial of the importance of the earth, and a belief in God becomes a spiritual opiate, under whose influence the aristocrats of wealth and power exploit the earth's resources for their own aggrandizement, impoverishing the masses. The strength in this line of propaganda lies in the measure of truth which it contains. The record of America's use of her natural resources is not without shame. The exploitation of our timber, grass, water, minerals, and soils by unscrupulous but powerful individuals shall always be a source of shame to our nation. Our materialistic opponents point to these proofs of history for their rejection of the spiritual basis of our ethics. Against this background they offer to the land-hungry people of southeast Asia a promise of an equitable distribution of the land and its resources and point to their materialism as proof of their good intentions. This puts our culture in a disadvantaged position in the struggle for the allegiance of human beings.

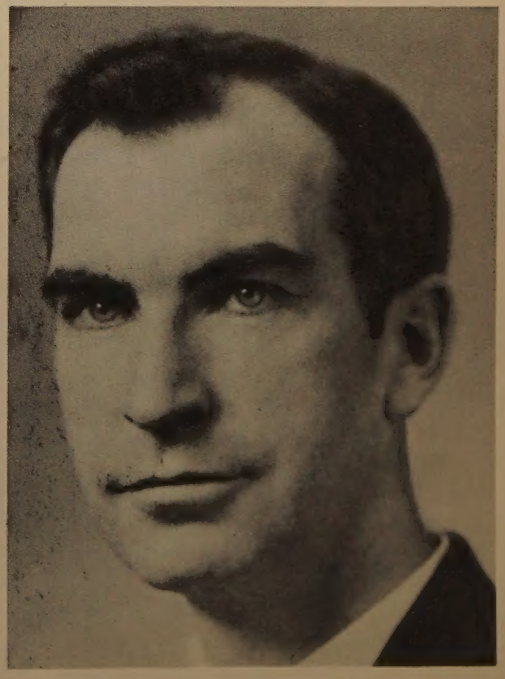
The dilemma in this conflict over the position of the earth in our theology is that the communists have chosen the field of battle. Unwittingly we find ourselves on one side of a spiritual-versus-material ideological struggle. We can never win this battle of ideas because we are saddled with a false alternative. The more vigorous our defense of the spiritual the more we enhance our materialistic opponent's position. The only way we can win, therefore, is to shift the battle to its proper ground of Christian materialism versus atheistic materialism. The evangelization of half of the people in the world may hinge on the outcome of this struggle. This is the basis for the assertion that the rural church is in the center of this struggle, because the fundamental issue involved is the position of the earth and its resources within the grand scheme of the Christian faith. In its most elemental nakedness, the spiritual significance of food for hungry people will determine their allegiance. If our theology ignores the earth and the things it produces our finest preaching will never be heard.

The imperative of the rural church is to re-discover in its own theological heritage such good news within the holy earth that it shall be able to survive this ideological battle and accomplish its divine mission. The rural churches of America, in their relative peace and security, should be earnestly and humbly seeking the resources

of the Christian faith which would clarify the theology of the earth. We have not made such an inquiry for many years. The general outlines for such a searching might be as follows:

(1) I believe that any theology which includes the earth must begin with the central event of Christianity which is the incarnation of Christ. We simply cannot speak forcibly to this issue if we begin with some vague pronouncement that the "earth is the Lord's" and then give it a Christian varnish with a parable on stewardship. The meaning of the earth within the Christian faith is not to be found in the bucolic setting of the parables. The only way that the earth can be brought in to our theology with sufficient power to overcome the princes of materialistic darkness is to interpret the central event of Christianity as that act of God inhabiting the earth. This transforms the earth as physical material making it the bearer of God's redeeming love. This transformation of the physical earth and the human beings that inhabit it is so complete that, for Christians, this was the real creation of the world. Because we are "new creatures in Christ" all of creation assumes a totally new significance.

(2) The great symbols of Christianity proclaim the centrality of the earth in its faith. Bread, the most elementary food stuff, has become the bearer of the most sacred of the sacraments of the church. Water, without which life is impossible, and from which the higher forms of life probably evolved, is the bearer of the sacrament of baptism. Symbolically, therefore, the whole physical earth and all that it produces bears the imprint of our new creation in Christ. This is vastly more than reiterating the Old Testament concept that the earth is the Lord's. It is the difference between the old covenant and the new; the difference between the law and Christian love. The Christian theology of the earth is not a concept which was added to the Old Testament theology but it fulfills Old Testament concepts so completely that they are transformed.



(3) Within the Christian faith all of life is a continuous sacrament in which human beings hold up to the Christ of creation the things of the earth which He has transformed. For Christians this is the supreme ritual of life which dissolves the distinctions between sacred and secular. Vocation, thus, becomes a calling, whether it is the vocation of the clergy, agriculture, industry, or commerce; all is encompassed within a sacramental matrix.

(4) The church is a redeemed fellowship within which Christians work out together the ways of expressing their vocation. Christians live in a continuous and urgent crisis as they attempt to live within an unregenerate culture

the ultimate purposes of God? And further shall we merely condemn the machines or shall we search the depths of our faith to find the Christ incarnate who is Lord also of our machines? Here stands the rural Christian, with his feed on the land, who sees the earth and all that it produces, and the machines with which he tills the soil as part of a new creation in Christ. And what the farmer sees can also be seen through the smoke and clamor of industry if his urban brother has the eyes of Christian faith.

and any attempt to express Christian vocation is basically revolutionary. No Christian dares to accept uncritically the institutions within which he lives. Measured against the demands of the Christian faith all human institutions are in error in some degree or in extreme instances, tyrannical. The church is the society of Christians which continually evaluates the relative good and evil in our society and plans for its reformation. This is a social process and, therefore, Christians must act together in societies to accomplish this mission. The community will be redeemed by a communion of saints, not by individuals. The judgment of God on our institutions extends also to the institution of the church. It is an historic Protestant belief that the church itself is in continual need of reformation. As Christians together seek the guidance of the Spirit of God for their own institutions.

I think these are the basic tenets of Christian faith which we must re-discover in rural life if the Christian Gospel is to have meaning for millions of people living under the spirit of other gods than the Father of Jesus Christ.

So far we have dealt with the external threat of atheistic materialism confronting our culture and the imperative of the rural church in answering the challenge. Now we shall turn our attention to the internal threat to the ancient bastions of our culture.

This is the challenge of scientific humanism which really means the enthronement of man as the center of the universe and the establishment of human accomplishment as to the ultimate criterion rather than the service of God. The chief end of man in American culture is to get ahead, not to glorify God. The central aim of education is to help ambitious young men and women to get ahead, hence the emphasis of the sciences at the expense of the humanities. We want "know how" but not necessarily "why".

In rural life scientific humanism expresses itself in a system geared to production for a market and only incidentally for the production of food and fiber for cold and hungry people. Because of its shallow values, the plowing up of grassland on the dry margin was entirely justified by the price of wheat even if the land was wasted forever. If there is money to be made by deep-well irrigation, then the public must not interfere with the rights of private individuals to exploit the underground water resource. The religious liberalism which has characterized our national life between the wars was a sanctification of scientific humanism. This was an attempt to make humanism humanitarian and thereby to permit it to save itself. This has received a severe jolt in the disasters of recent years but the veneration of science and the accomplishments of men are still very much sovereign. The superficial piety of prayer breakfasts and a meditation room in Congress and staff prayers in the Department of Agriculture do not impress me as the dethronement of scientism.

The only salvation from this pre-occupation with ourselves lies within the Christian faith which demands a realignment of our commitments. Only within these ancient principles can a significance be found for life which will save us from destruction. Here the rediscovery of vocation holds the greatest promise for an answer to scientific humanism. This is the logical extension of the belief in the incarnation of God through Christ and how this transforms the daily work, in the same manner as it transforms creation.

Here the rural church is in a crucial position to take the lead in this renascence. In rural life some of the complexities of our culture are stripped away so that elemental relationships to the earth are comprehensible within the Christian view. Commitment to Christian vocation can begin here and then spread to other areas of life more encrusted in secularism. In the rural church the Christian faith has a beachhead on a continent of secularism. Our imperative is to expand this beachhead from the sources of the Christian faith and the power of a soverign Christ. The problem confronting the rural church is to work out the techniques for the articulation of these concepts, in study groups, in the preaching of the Word, in the dramatization of the Gospel in rural symbols and art forms, in Christian action to correct the social evils, in other words, in the total mission of the church to its culture.

A Christian materialism must become a primary commitment to combat the threat of atheistic materialism from without and a commitment to Christian vocation must displace the cult of the machine from within. In both these areas, the rural church is in a key position.

A few weeks ago a large airliner crashed in the water just short of the end of the runway at Idlewild Airport in New York, and twenty-six persons lost their lives. The pilot made two passes at the airport and each time came in too low. The third time he crashed. One theory for the accident is that the radar instruments were off, that they brought the pilot through the overcast too low and even though he may have known this after the third try he was so conditioned to rigourous instrument training that he followed the faulty instrument to his death even though his own sight and instincts told him he was too low. William Faulkner, the noted American author wrote a letter to the editor of the New York Times about this crash which the editor captioned "Cult of the Machine". Faulkner comments on the enslavement of this man to a gadget which his instincts probably told him was in error. He says he was a "Victim of that mystical, unquestioning, almost religious awe and veneration in which our culture has trained us to hold gadgets--any gadget, if it is only complex enough and cryptic enough and costs enough." Mr. Faulkner goes on to say that we had all better grieve for all people beneath a culture which holds its machines in such veneration.

This is the crux of the issue. Shall we use the resources of the earth, its produce and our machines, to glorify man or to serve